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ABSTRACT

This monograph analyzes new competency-based college admissions strategies linked to school reform initiatives that focus on linking K-12 and postsecondary education systems. It is based on data collected as part of a national survey of state higher education agencies and site visits to Colorado, Georgia, Maryland, Ohio, Washington, and Wisconsin, with Wisconsin, Colorado, and Washington selected for in-depth study because of their early involvement with and substantial commitment to a competency-based model. Following an introduction, individual sections address: (1) policy environments that support change and new roles for state systems as facilitators and partners in the development of competency-based systems; (2) reasons for competency-based admissions (to respond to political forces, to articulate curriculum with public schools, and to ensure better-prepared students); (3) development and implementation of competency-based admissions and competency assessment; and (4) the effects so far, especially in Wisconsin and Colorado, the only states now admitting students via competency-based programs; and (5) continuing challenges, including costs and benefits, predictability and portability questions, compatibility with nontraditional learning, and common understandings of terminology. (DB)

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Statewide Strategies for Implementing Competency-based Admissions Standards

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JANUARY 1999

State Strategies that Support Successful Student Transitions from Secondary to Postsecondary Education

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Foreword

Statewide Strategies for Implementing Competency-based Admissions Standards analyzes new competency-based admissions strategies linked to school reform initiatives being developed in several states. Information for this brief was collected as part of the study of *State Strategies that Support Successful Student Transitions from Secondary to Postsecondary Education*, a joint initiative of the State Higher Education Executive Officers (SHEEO) and ACT, Inc. carried out from October 1996 through February 1998. The intent of the study was to examine state-level strategies that support student success through the linkage of K-12 and postsecondary education systems. Information was gathered through a 50-state survey of state higher education agencies and site visits to Colorado, Georgia, Maryland, Ohio, Washington, and Wisconsin. In particular, site visits to Colorado, Washington, and Wisconsin focused on their efforts to develop and implement competency-based admissions policies. Other strategy briefs in this series will target the following issues:

- Statewide School-College (K-16) Partnerships to Improve Student Performance
- Statewide Strategies for Remedial Education Policies
- Statewide Strategies to Create Quality Teacher Education and Professional Development Programs
- Statewide Strategies to Support Applied and Contextual Learning in K-16 Programs.

SHEEO and ACT encourage education leaders and elected officials to use these documents to support state-level discussions aimed at student preparation for college. We welcome your review of these publications and suggestions for how we might assist in your efforts to effectively link K-12 and postsecondary education.

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This strategy brief was prepared by David Conley, Director of the Proficiency-based Admissions Standards System (PASS), Oregon University System. The author was a member of a team of state education leaders who participated in the study of *State Strategies that Support Successful Student Transitions from Secondary to Postsecondary Education* and was directly involved in site visits to Colorado and Washington. SHEEO and ACT sincerely appreciate his commitment to this study, as well as his comprehensive and careful analysis of state initiatives addressing state competency-based admissions efforts.

Several individuals were critical to the success of this study. We are especially grateful to Sharon Samson of the Colorado Commission on Higher Education, Doug Scrima from the Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board, and Sharon James, Larry Rubin, and Fran Garb of the University of Wisconsin System, and their staffs for hosting three of the six site visits. They invited critique of their states' efforts and provided invaluable data and policy documents to inform the study. In addition, many others representing state higher education agencies and national organizations participated on site visit teams and provided thoughtful comments about both successful practices and continuing challenges.

In addition to those mentioned above, we would like to thank Robert Wallhaus, Alene Russell, Nancy Shapiro, Michael Rosenthal, and Robert Rice for their critical review of this strategy brief. We also appreciate the talents of Paul Albright and Catherine Walker who contributed to the production of the final document.

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Statewide Strategies for Implementing Competency-Based Admissions Standards

Introduction

The period between the release of the report *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 and the present can be characterized as one of continuing, sustained educational reform. Activities focused on the policies and practices of public schools, and were driven by a general sense that schooling was neither as demanding nor as effective as it could or should be. Reforms emanated from the state level. As school equity lawsuits and legislation shifted the control of school finance from the local to the state level, legislatures became more activist and concerned with performance. Simultaneously, the voice of the business community (particularly large employers and high-tech industries) was heard clearly. The perceived inadequacies of both the public school system and the current workforce formed the basis for educational reform in the 1980s.

State higher education systems responded by increasing admissions standards. Generally, this meant developing requirements for more courses in core subject areas. The SHEEO survey report called *Statewide College Admissions, Student Preparation, and Remediation Policies and Programs* (1998) identified 27 states with statewide admission requirements. Of this group, 23 adopted statewide standards for the first time since 1972, with most (19) adopting such standards in the 1980s and 1990s. The remaining four states updated their requirements, generally specifying study in a core curriculum of courses. Twenty-three systems currently require students to complete specific Carnegie units of academic coursework in high school.

Increasingly, state higher education systems are becoming partners or at least players in state school reform efforts. These new relationships are driven by a variety of forces, but one of the most important is the emergence of statewide K-12 content or learning standards and assessment systems. Once reform is driven from the state level, it is possible to establish common expectations (and assessments) for all students within a state. State legislatures and departments of education turned to this strategy in increasing numbers during the 1990s.

Student learning standards addressed two issues simultaneously: the need to enforce quality control and improvement in public schools, and the need to respond to employer concerns about under-prepared workers. In general, improved college preparation has not been seen as the

primary motivation of the K-12 standards movement (except to the extent that post-secondary remedial education has become a concern of state legislators). However, changes of this magnitude will have effects on the entire student population and educational program. Schools have begun to try new modes of organization and instruction, modes that breach the traditional organizers of course titles and credits. Integrated curriculum, project-centered learning, work-based learning, block classes, tech-prep curriculum, and school-to-work programs all produce results in forms that are not entirely compatible with subject-based, credit-based college admissions requirements.

In response to these forces and others, a number of state higher education systems have developed and begun to implement competency-based admissions systems. A competency-based admission system is defined as one that requires students to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in specified academic areas and at specified performance levels. Generally, these standards are consistent statewide, although some models allow individual school districts or high schools to establish their own standards that must meet or exceed state standards.

Competency-based admissions system designs have been diverse in order to match the differing policy contexts of the states. In all states, competency-based systems have been deve' oped not with the goal of leading secondary school reform but in response to changes in high schools. State higher education systems have expressed a variety of reasons for adopting competency-based admissions. These reasons acknowledge changes occurring in high schools, in particular, but often address other goals of continuing importance and concern to postsecondary systems such as the desire for better-prepared students and reduced remediation.

These competency-based programs create a smoother transition between systems for students affected by reforms. The SHEEO/ ACT study was undertaken to examine the state-level strategies that support student success through these linkages of public education and postsecondary systems. The 50-state SHEEO survey identified 11 states that were involved to some degree in examining a competency-based approach to admissions. Six states were visited (Colorado, Georgia, Maryland, Ohio, Washington, and Wisconsin) and three (Colorado, Washington, and Wisconsin) were selected for in-depth study due to their early involvement with and substantial commitment to a competency-based admissions model. Other states, most notably Oregon and Maryland, also have developed comprehensive competency-based approaches. All of these states began their efforts for differing reasons and in varied policy contexts. As a result, their approaches, while having much in common at one level, are uniquely adapted to their policy environments.

Policy Environments Supporting Change

Competency-based admissions systems have been created as a result of the interaction among various policy forces in each state. Employers have been influential in some states in encouraging a linkage between standards in pre-collegiate education and postsecondary admissions policies. Reform-oriented legislatures or governors are often in the background watching to see how higher education will respond to changes mandated for the K-12 system, particularly the imposition of standards and assessment requirements. Within higher education, leadership for competency-based approaches has come from central coordinating or governing boards. These boards have had the authority to establish or negotiate common or compatible admissions standards for all of the state's public colleges and universities. This has allowed the higher education systems to develop alternative or pilot projects that are acceptable to the institutions in their systems.

As these initiatives have developed, new roles for state higher education systems have emerged. In some states, higher education boards are facilitating discussions and working with faculties in high schools and colleges and universities to negotiate admissions changes. Other state higher education agencies are working in partnership with their state K-12 departments and local school districts to develop and implement new policies.

New roles as facilitators and partners

In states where state education reform legislation did not directly require development of competency-based admissions, state systems often have assumed a facilitating role. The University of Wisconsin System was one of the first to consider competency-based admissions. The driving force behind this project was not legislative action or any other external mandate, but rather a desire to work with high schools to accommodate students who may have come through redesigned or restructured programs. Beginning in 1992 and extending into 1993, Wisconsin professors and high school teachers crafted a set of competencies specifying what a student should know and be able to do to be admitted to any campus of the University of Wisconsin System. This was the first of the current attempts to establish entrance criteria that did not reference course titles and the grades that result from those courses.

The structure of Wisconsin's postsecondary system aided these efforts. All public universities, colleges, and two-year transfer programs are part of the University of Wisconsin System. Therefore, it was possible to construct competencies with a reasonable guarantee that they would be acceptable at all campuses in the system. This enabled reforming high schools to address parental concerns about the effects of reforms on college admission. Wisconsin system administrators were sensitive to the oft-repeated charge that higher education was a roadblock to high school reform. They saw an

opportunity to get ahead of any perception that they were stopping high schools from adapting curriculum, integrating subjects, changing course titles, or using new forms of assessment.

Colorado's governor, Roy Romer, was a strong believer in and proponent of learning standards for students. At the same time, Colorado had a strong tradition of local control of schools. One set of standards for all schools would not work in this environment. While the state developed a set of model standards, school districts were free to create their own standards so long as they met or exceeded the model standards.

Beginning in 1993, the Colorado Commission on Higher Education (CCHE) facilitated a process whereby higher education faculty created College-Level Entrance Competencies jointly with high school teachers and others to help local districts as they developed their standards. In this environment, CCHE acted to negotiate and facilitate communication between high schools developing standards and universities considering how to respond. Strategies included supporting pilot projects to design competencies at one institution and organizing conversations and educating admissions officers at all institutions.

In addition to facilitating change, higher education agencies became partners with their state K-12 departments in states where legislation either mandated or essentially required their participation in standards-based reforms. Together they are creating new systems to support successful exit from high school and admissions to postsecondary degree programs.

For example, Washington's Higher Education Coordinating Board's (HECB) efforts to identify college admission competencies resulted from a state mandate to the K-12 system. Passed in 1993, the Basic Education Act (ESHB 1209) required schools to offer programs leading to Certificates of Mastery (CoM) for students at approximately age 16. Colleges and universities were expected to link CoM benchmarks with admissions in some fashion. Washington's business community was instrumental in the passage of this legislation and wanted to make sure that schools could make changes necessary to implement the CoM program without the inhibition of traditional college admission standards. Representatives of the HECB interacted with the Department of Public Instruction as it developed the competencies for the CoM. After these were approved, the HECB organized a process by which faculty from Washington universities and colleges reviewed the competencies and translated or adapted them for purposes of college admission, in some cases adding competencies that are required beyond the CoM.

Oregon's Proficiency-based Admission Standards System (PASS), initiated in 1993, has much in common with the Washington state model. Oregon's reforms call for a Certificate of Initial Mastery (CIM) around grade 10 and Advanced Mastery (CAM) at grade 12. The CIM focuses on academic performance and the CAM adds work readiness skills. Unlike the Washington initiative, the relationship between the CAM and college admission was not explicitly defined in the enabling legislation

adopted in 1991. The Oregon University System (OUS) implemented the PASS Project in 1993 to develop competency-based entry standards that were compatible with CIM and CAM standards. PASS developed proficiencies separately from those promulgated by the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) for the two certificates. This led to a period of tension and confusion regarding what standards schools should follow. In the end, a partnership approach evolved without mandate, as both OUS and ODE realized they needed to produce a set of aligned standards that allowed high schools to plan curriculum sensibly.

A continuing challenge and unmet goal for the Oregon initiative (as well as those in other states) is to determine if a changed admissions process can draw from a wider range of student learning. For example, if entrance competencies can validate the more application-oriented learning expected in the CAM, will it be possible for students to prepare for work and career and still address many college preparation requirements? If so, students could choose from a variety of programs (including applied and work-based or community-based learning) to meet some or perhaps all of the requirements for college admission.

Maryland's approach is different from those already described. The state's Department of Education had been using performance assessments at the elementary and middle school levels since the early 1990s. The Maryland State Performance Assessment Program (MSPAP) reports results by school, with special recognition of schools that achieve pre-set benchmarks. The success of the MSPAP assessments provided the groundwork for the current development of more rigorous assessments that will be required for high school graduation in 2004. The high school assessments will be related to the state standards, or Core Learning Goals, in the four major subject areas (English, mathematics, social science, and science) and the skills for success. The goals for high school graduation were developed collaboratively by K-12 teachers together with disciplinary faculty from the two- and four-year institutions of higher education, and they are directly aligned with the University System of Maryland admissions requirements.

Why Attempt Competency-Based Admissions

Beyond responding to political forces, higher education systems have identified a broader range of reasons for creating a new form of admission. Key additional goals include opportunities to collaborate with public schools to make admissions expectations clearer and, perhaps the ultimate goal for higher education, to help ensure that applicants are better prepared to succeed in college and that the applicant pool is broader and deeper. Reasons systems give for developing competency-based models include the following:

Responding to political forces. In Washington and Oregon, competency-based admissions systems allow the state higher education

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agencies to respond to legislation or regulations passed by state legislatures. In addition, these initiatives address, at least indirectly, employer concerns about under-prepared workers in the two states.

Articulating curriculum with public schools. Wisconsin's efforts serve to encourage, or at least not block, innovation in high schools. The Colorado and Oregon approaches seek to facilitate articulation between restructuring secondary schools and state colleges and universities. Additionally, as more high schools restructure their vocational education programs into tech-prep programs that often teach academic content in an applied fashion, universities are called upon to accept the validity of these programs for college admission. Oregon and Washington have strong tech-prep initiatives underway and seek to eliminate the barriers between the college prep and "tech-prep" curriculums. Being able to acknowledge tech-prep programs also helps higher education validate learning that is taking place in a variety of settings outside the classroom and across disciplinary boundaries. With state departments of education in the lead on educational standards and assessments, Maryland, Washington, and Oregon all seek to develop positive working relationships among education agencies. Every state higher education system reports that one of the key benefits of their competency-based initiative is enhanced communication between high school teachers and university faculty.

Ensuring better-prepared students. All systems indicate they seek better-prepared students, and that their competency-based approaches helped identify more clearly for teachers and students the knowledge and skills needed to succeed in college. All systems also hope to reduce the remediation needs of incoming college freshmen, particularly in English and mathematics, and to enhance retention of admitted students. Several systems, including Colorado, Oregon, Maryland, and Washington, have the goal of being able to place incoming freshmen into university courses at a more appropriate level of difficulty. Through better placement and perhaps award of credit, these systems seek to create incentives for all students to achieve at higher levels while in high school. A closely related goal is to counteract what some systems believe to be high school "grade inflation" by establishing a set of commonly-understood standards linked to specified student performances and achievement levels. Of great importance, particularly to many of the faculty involved in establishing the proficiencies, is to encourage students to take more control of their own learning in anticipation of the college experience where such control is expected to a much greater degree than in high schools.

Developing and Implementing Competency-based Admissions

The ways competencies have been developed differ primarily on whether state standards had been identified and adopted. In Colorado, the state had already developed a model set of standards, and districts were free to set their own, higher standards primarily focused on grades 4, 8, and 11 content standards. There-

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fore, CCHE's process acknowledged its relationship to the state's standards by defining the college entry expectations or grade 12 performance levels. In Washington, faculty used the state's Essential Academic Learning Requirements as the basis for creating admissions competencies. Oregon, by contrast, developed "proficiencies" essentially in parallel with the state's standards development efforts. In Wisconsin, with no legislative mandate, the higher education system was able to start from scratch. Wisconsin's competencies currently face a new challenge, however, as statewide Model Academic Standards were adopted by all public schools in 1998. These standards are not specifically related to the existing University of Wisconsin System admission competencies. Alignment of these two documents is underway. In all states, these processes involved postsecondary faculty extensively and generally included high school teachers as equal partners, or at the least as reviewers and valued critics.

The relationship of these college competencies to broader K-12 standards is a pivotal and difficult issue. As noted earlier, K-12 standards-based reforms have not been initiated for the express purpose of enabling more students to enter college. However, if more students master the standards, they will have that effect. Higher education's role in standards development is often equivocal because many education reformers do not want colleges to drive reforms. However, if colleges are not involved, the result can be standards that have no clear relation to college admission, as is the case in many states that have developed K-12 standards. If achievement is not linked to a tangible goal, such as college admission, the reason or motivation for students to achieve higher standards is unclear and the standards may not have their desired impact.

Implementing Competencies

All states are implementing competencies incrementally. In some cases this means beginning with fewer competencies and adding more over time; others are starting with volunteer sites only, and planning to expand in later years. Implementation generally must address how teachers can "translate" what they teach currently in their courses into the expected competencies. Even where competencies are mandated, the process by which schools will make the transition from grades is often intentionally vague. The more change in current educational practices the competency-based model requires, the longer the transition timeline.

Colorado is focusing on mathematics and communications competencies first. A pilot project allows high schools to certify students who meet high school standards as college ready. Eighteen high schools participated in 1996-97, the first year of the pilot effort. All but two public colleges and universities in the state agree to accept students based on the school's certification of students having met standards. The strategy is to make participation voluntary and rely on incentives for high schools to participate. In Washington, the Admissions Standards Action Committee (ASAC), with broad representation from higher

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(ASAC), with broad representation from higher education and elementary-secondary education, oversees initial implementation of "Group I" competencies. These are in English, mathematics, and world languages. Group II implementation, including science, social sciences, and the arts, will follow. Wisconsin chose to use a piloting strategy where a small number of high schools put the entire competency-based system into place at once. Beginning in 1995, teachers at eight high schools utilized the competencies to judge student work. Students received both competency scores and grades, and applied with evidence of each. Oregon has chosen to begin by expecting proficiency in English and mathematics in 2001, then in an additional subject area each succeeding year in conjunction with CIM implementation.

Gradual implementation allows teachers, parents, and university admissions officers and faculty to become more familiar and comfortable with the system. However, this gradual transition has at least two drawbacks. First, many high school faculty seem reluctant to change until a mandate is upon them and it is crystal clear that admission requirements will, in fact, change. Second, high schools are less inclined to engage in the type of comprehensive program and curricular redesign that a change to proficiencies permits and encourages. Proficiencies tend to be laid over existing courses on a discipline-specific basis, rather than serving as a framework of the reconceptualization of the entire course of study in which students engage within a department or across departments.

Assessing Competencies

Competency systems fall into two broad categories: those that trust teacher judgment explicitly and those that either combine measures in addition to teacher judgment, or that have mechanisms to standardize teacher judgments.

Colorado, Wisconsin, and Washington accept the judgments of high school teachers in differing ways. Colorado teachers use their districts' standards, while Wisconsin and Washington teachers reference the higher education system's competencies. Wisconsin high school teachers assess students through normal grading methods, then meet at year end to rate students on competencies independent of grades. Washington is developing an assessment prototype to identify students who meet defined competency standards. Teachers will use indicators, scoring guides, and examples of student work to determine levels of proficiency. Washington is also developing competencies related to success in work and society that are not included in competency-based admissions process.

By contrast, Oregon and Maryland rely on tests to differing degrees. Maryland is in the process of developing end-of-course tests in areas required for university admission. The tests will be related to Maryland standards called Core Learning Goals. University faculty established the entrance expectations that help guide test developers, and are involved in the teams reviewing the assessment items in the content areas. Oregon uses results from standards-based

tests, performance tasks, and work samples developed for the CIM, along with collections of student work scored by teachers using criteria developed by PASS and aligned with the Oregon content standards.

Each approach to assessment has its advantages and disadvantages. Developers in Wisconsin, Washington, and Colorado point out that universities already rely on teacher judgments in the form of grades, and the competency-based approach simply refines that judgment by introducing standards and criteria. The result is more consistent judgments about student performance in relation to college readiness and more clarity about the skills and abilities expected of incoming students. Approaches that require assessments, or more highly-standardized scoring of student work, such as Maryland or Oregon, take longer and require more resources for test development and administration or teacher training to score student work. Test-based approaches may be more appealing to some university faculty who find teacher judgments suspect. The technical adequacy of systems that utilize statewide tests, common scoring guides, and performance tasks tend to be under greater scrutiny by system developers, legislators, and interested parties with backgrounds in measurement than do approaches that rely solely on individual teacher judgment. This is perhaps natural, since the technology to determine technical adequacy of standardized assessments is more highly developed and manageable than methods to gauge the consistency or reliability of individual teacher judgments.

Effects So Far

Only two states, Wisconsin and Colorado, have begun admitting students via the competency route. Of the two, Wisconsin has the most information on how competency-based admits perform. Two cohorts of students have been admitted via the Competency-based Admission (CBA) pilot project. In general, CBA freshmen did as well as or better than students admitted via grades and credits. Furthermore, teacher judgments of competency, while closely related to grades, were not identical. In addition, the competency-based system tended to have fewer students clustered at the highest point on the five-point scoring scale when compared with high school grades, which tended to cluster toward the four on the traditional four-point scale.

Colorado's program also has allowed students to apply via competency. Initially, 18 high schools chose to participate in the pilot project. Additional high schools have since begun to participate. The number of students applying via competencies has been modest to date, giving universities an opportunity to develop the systems needed to process such applications before they receive large numbers of applications.

Oregon has begun to see students applying with evidence of proficiency in second languages in place of course requirements. But, the Oregon University System expects to see a large increase in the fall of 1999 when students from a pool of approximately 3,000, whose profi-

ciency is being determined at 50 pilot high schools, will be applying to state universities.

Research undertaken to date indicates that teachers who utilize proficiencies teach differently than those who do not, and that students prefer proficiency-based classes to their other classes. The proficiency-based classrooms also demonstrate more emphasis on projects and more of a balance between lecture and other instructional strategies. For example, science teachers have begun emphasizing student understanding of scientific inquiry over vocabulary memorization, and math teachers gear instruction towards tests with complex, real-world problems that might take several days to solve and have multiple correct answers.

All these systems have plans to follow student progress in college, as Wisconsin has already begun to do, to determine if the competency-based measures work as well as existing measures to predict student performance and persistence. In addition, intensive evaluation is occurring in Washington and Oregon to determine the effects competency-based requirements have on high school teaching, student learning, and course structure.

Continuing Challenges

The pioneering states have all recognized the enormity of the challenge and the complexity of the change involved in altering admissions criteria and methods. Even as they address issues such as standards, assessment, and reporting, new ones emerge. Continuing challenges such as cost, predictability for student success, portability, and training must also be addressed.

Costs and Benefits

These systems cannot ultimately cost a great deal more or require significantly more resources than existing systems if they are to be institutionalized successfully. The pilot projects do not necessarily reflect the true costs of competency-based admissions, which include one-time training and information expenses along with on-going costs to monitor and revise standards and assessments, and to update training. The challenge will be for competency-based models to provide enough added value to the admissions process to justify any additional effort or expense that is required. Such added value can take the form of decreased remediation, increased retention (or persistence), better placement data, and closer relations with in-state high schools. All of these have tangible value and must be taken into consideration when calculating the true costs and benefits of a competency-based system.

The states profiled in this strategy brief have all moved beyond early conceptions of competency-based admissions that assumed students would submit "portfolios" of their high school work, perhaps by the boxload, and in the process overwhelm admissions officers. The more sophisticated designs presented here seek to create highly efficient systems that judge competency; however, they may still be less efficient initially than the well-established, thoroughly understood systems that exist

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currently. Absent an understanding of the potential broader benefits of competency-based admissions, such systems may be judged too costly to attempt on a large scale.

Predictability questions

University admissions processes throughout this century have become increasingly geared toward predicting student success. The current multi-measure system appears to serve adequately in terms of its predictive power. Can a competency-based system hope to improve upon the current combination of grade point average, ACT/SAT scores, courses taken, and class standing? Those who have worked on developing these competency-based systems are hopeful in this regard, in part because the competencies have been designed specifically with college success as the reference point, and have been designed collaboratively by postsecondary and high school faculty. Similarly, the assessment methods also are designed to gauge the presence of the kinds of skills, abilities, and knowledge necessary for success in college. This type of conscious alignment is unusual and harkens to an era when prep schools consciously aligned with the expectations of a set of universities to which most of their graduates matriculated. Whether this sort of alignment will work as well on the larger scale represented by a state will be watched closely in the coming years. All of the states profiled in this strategy brief do plan to continue to utilize ACT/SAT data for the foreseeable future, thereby allowing national comparisons more easily as well as adding a measure of known predictive ability to the formula.

Portability questions

Another key question: what happens when students want to go out of state? Common reporting forms or transcripts in some states provide more comprehensive information of student coursework and assessments than the current transcripts. For example, Washington is developing the Student Performance Reporting Mechanism (SPRM) to replace the current high school transcript. It will include CoM information, classroom assessments, and achievement after receiving CoM. Admissions officers will be trained to interpret SPRM in a consistent, equitable fashion. Oregon's Proficiency Transcript Report (PTR) is designed to function in a similar fashion and will utilize a multi-point scale to help admissions officers at selective universities recognize the highest achieving students. Wisconsin has developed a Standardized Reporting Profile (SRP) that schools use to rate students' levels of competency attainment. The SRP also contains information about the student's attendance, effort, and other activities that help admissions officers gain a better-rounded picture of applicants. These common reporting forms may not fully address questions about quality or comparability of high school coursework. Institutions always have had to handle some transcripts on a case-by-case basis and will likely continue to do so.

While these competency-based systems were not conceived initially to meet the needs of the nation's most selective universities, students nevertheless will apply to such universities with competency-based transcripts. Oregon and Washington, in particular, have attempted to be

responsive to the needs of highly competitive universities by reporting student performance that exceeds entry-level requirements. Each has created a five-point scale that allows students to demonstrate achievement at two levels higher than that required for admission. Given the grade compression being evidenced among the nation's highest achieving students, this new reporting system may provide more room for the highest achievers to distinguish themselves. However, selective universities must be willing to accept these new systems as equal to existing measures. Evidence is good to date that many will be willing to do so. A consortium of admissions officers representing universities in Washington, Oregon, and California has met during the past three years to work collaboratively in the design of the Washington and Oregon competency-based admissions models. Consortium participants include Stanford University and the University of California system. Admissions officers at other universities throughout the nation have been kept apprised of these efforts.

Nontraditional Learning

Earlier in this strategy brief, it was noted that high schools are engaged in serious program and curriculum redesign. These new forms of teaching and learning tend to emphasize the application of knowledge and are often taught in forms that are not entirely compatible with subject-based, credit-based college admissions requirements. At the same time, these reforms represent the curriculum that many, perhaps most, students eventually will take. If this curriculum is rigorous, demanding, and rich in the academic concepts and skills needed for college success, how will colleges judge this curriculum when it is used to fulfill admissions requirements? States such as Oregon and Washington have established "career-related learning standards" or "life skill standards" and expect all students to master them. Will universities be willing to accept learning in these areas? Can these more varied academic experiences be incorporated into a competency-based system designed for college admission? How well do university faculty understand and accept this new emphasis on "applied academics"? Who will be responsible to certify student competency when it is attained or demonstrated outside of the school building? The Oregon and Washington competency-based systems are attempting to cope with these challenges. Oregon's model, for example, does not distinguish where a skill was mastered as long as a collection of evidence sufficiently convincing can be assembled for judgment by a trained teacher, or if test scores are at a level deemed to meet proficiency standards.

Key to this strategy is a willingness by the department of education and higher education agency to work together to establish the means by which student work might be judged, regardless of its origin. Creation of such common scoring systems is complex and difficult. Even after establishing such systems, it still remains to be seen if students who acquire skills in non-traditional settings will be able to adapt to traditional academic learning models upon admission. Or perhaps these

students will begin to have an effect on college teaching by expecting to learn and being capable of learning in more applied ways.

Common Understandings

These varied instruments illustrate another challenge: the use of different terminology and nomenclature in each system. This is normal in the early phases of any new system but can lead to confusion, for example, between what is meant by competencies, proficiencies, content standards, and performance standards. Lack of a common vocabulary is only symptomatic of a larger, underlying problem; that is, the lack of a common understanding of what college-ready performance looks like. Many individual teachers certainly believe they understand; however, competency-based systems require common understandings, not individual perceptions. Unless a competency-based system relies exclusively on tests, teacher judgments are critical components in defining competency in practice. Even where tests are employed, teachers need to do more than teach to the test; they need to understand the academic discipline and the broader cognitive skills that universities desire. The type and amount of training necessary to achieve such common understanding is daunting, given the decentralized structure of American education.

The states reviewed in this strategy brief all relied on conversations across system lines to create common understandings and definitions of competency. Continued, sustained effort will be required to ensure students are judged fairly and consistently, particularly since college admissions is a "high stakes" decision with significant impact on the lives of students. Such efforts will require joint leadership from higher education and K-12 systems along with the allocation or reallocation of adequate resources to ensure the quality, equity and consistency of competency-based admissions.

Conclusion

University faculty and administrators will subject these competency-based systems to intense scrutiny during the coming years. The performance of students admitted via competency will be examined closely, as will the efficiency of the systems. The question will be asked: what are we getting in return for the energy and time we are expending on competency-based admissions? The most critical challenge facing all states developing competency-based admissions approaches aligned with K-12 reform is whether they work better than traditional practices. "Better" has many meanings and is defined by the state's policy context to a considerable degree. However, the fact that the impetus for this change is not so much a perception that admissions is broken as it is that pre-collegiate education is changing means college and university faculty will have to be "sold" to some extent on the utility of competency-based systems, absent state or system requirements to develop such programs. This suggests the need for significant involvement by faculty through all phases of development of any competency-based model or system.

Finally, the likelihood of students admitted via competency-based methods performing better than traditional admits is contingent to a large extent on the degree to which the K-12 system really does improve. In those states where standards are high enough, where all educators are referring to common standards and teaching toward them, where assessment systems provide needed data on student achievement in relation to the standards, and where incentives and sanctions align to motivate students to reach the standards, the sometimes lofty goal of a larger, deeper pool of better-prepared students will be within reach.

The competency-based system cannot change the American educational system single-handedly. However, it can send a clearer set of signals to schools that are working toward higher achievement for all students. Over time, these signals should lead to an increase in the number of students who reasonably can be expected to meet college-level expectations without need for remediation or exceptions. If this self-reinforcing loop of higher K-12 standards and competency-based admissions can be maintained, educational reform may be one step closer to achieving its goal of improving the performance of American students.